

FOREWORD

Wetlands are among the world's most productive environments. They are very important for the way they maintain ecological processes, as well as for the diverse flora and fauna they shelter and support. Wetlands provide tremendous economic benefits to humans, through fisheries production, maintenance of water tables, water storage and flood control, shoreline stabilization, water purification and recreational opportunities. Unfortunately, however, wetlands are also amongst the world's most threatened habitats.

The people of the Oceania region share common aspirations towards ecologically sustainable development. We wish to use our resources without using them up. We aim therefore for "human use of wetlands so that they may yield the greatest continuous benefit to present generations while maintaining their potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations" (as defined by the Ramsar Convention - the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat).

However, a number of unique circumstances in the region combine to limit the opportunities for both development and conservation of wetlands and other ecosystems. These include the small land masses of islands and their dispersal over large ocean areas. In some countries, the pressures of population density and increased per capita consumption also threaten ecologically sustainable development.

The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) 1991-1995 Action Plan for Managing the Environment of the South Pacific Region has, amongst others, the objectives to:

- protect terrestrial and marine ecosystems and species which require special attention;
- promote the conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands and coral reefs.

In the development of effective wetland conservation strategies, one of the first steps is the compilation of an inventory of the most important wetland sites. Then regional and national priorities for conservation of wetlands can be drawn up, and projects implemented.

This Directory aims to provide such an essential database, as a basis for action. It provides an inventory of wetlands of international importance in the Oceania region, including twenty-five political entities from Palau, Guam and the Solomon Islands in the west to Easter Island in the east, and from the Mariana and Hawaiian islands in the north to New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the south.

The project was initiated at the Fourth South Pacific Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas held in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in September 1989. The Action Strategy for Nature Conservation revised at that meeting placed emphasis on the need for detailed inventories of the region's natural ecosystems. The lack of attention given to wetlands in Oceania was noted, and the compilation of an inventory of important wetland ecosystems was seen as an appropriate and timely endeavour.

The project was carried out as a joint venture of the Ramsar Bureau, International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB), Asian Wetland Bureau (AWB) and my organization, the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), in close collaboration with other international and national agencies. Emphasis was given to obtaining the maximum participation by conservation bodies and academic institutions in the countries concerned.

The production of the Directory is but one of many important steps designed to address the conservation needs of wetlands. SPREP's South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme, commencing in 1993, will help to establish, and initially manage, a series of large, diverse Conservation Areas, in which human activities will not be excluded, but will be guided to protect important ecological features and to enable sustainable use of the area's natural resources. It is to be hoped that the regions's important wetlands will feature prominently amongst the potential Conservation Areas submitted for funding under this programme.

Only by continuing conservation activities can we hope to protect and sustainably use our wetland resources in perpetuity. The compilation of the *Directory of Wetlands in Oceania* is an important first step.

Dr Vili Fuavao
Director, SPREP

